

A Solomon Islands national election was held on 19 November 2014. SSGM mobilised observation teams in 12 constituencies, conducting voter surveys, observing campaigns and interviewing community leaders. Overall, the election was conducted in a very orderly manner. Voting in the constituency I observed (North Vella Lavella, Western Province) was conducted without any obvious intimidation or interference. Vote counting was procedurally impeccable. Electoral officials and police were highly professional in their conduct, and candidates' scrutineers were included, appropriately, in a highly transparent process.

Such procedural regularity, however, is no guide to the politics of the election. This *In Brief* reports on some of the more important observations made during the North Vella campaign and marks out some of the implications for understanding electoral politics and development in Solomon Islands.

In North Vella, Milner Tozaka OBE, formerly a distinguished diplomat, first won the seat in 2006, and again, with a much increased vote, in 2010. In 2014, he was favoured to win again. Tozaka had to beat three other candidates, but, as the incumbent, he had access to Rural Constituency Development Funds (RCDF). Additionally, his opponents were all based in Ward 9 (one of two wards of the electorate), meaning that they would most likely split the vote in that ward between them, leaving Tozaka with the advantage in the more populous Ward 10. Tozaka maintained effective networks across the electorate, particularly among United Church leaders and chiefs. His wife, Jenny, is the provincial member for Ward 10.

In the results, these expectations were vindicated: Tozaka won the seat with 43 per cent of the total valid vote, defeating Honiara businessman Jennings Movobule on 34 per cent. He is now Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade in the Democratic Coalition for Change Government, led by Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. Tozaka's appointment to this role signals Sogavare's desire to have a closer relationship with the Australian Government than previously (cf. Dinnen 2008).

The political system awards SBD6 million per annum (approximately AUD950,000) to each sitting member of parliament (MP) as RCDF. These funds are disbursed at the discretion of the MP with little accountability for how the money is spent. Over time, increases in the RCDF paid to MPs has institutionalised a system of clientelism that has reshaped expectations of national development into forms that have adapted to the position and resources of political patrons (Cox 2009).

It was clear from our conversations and surveys that the disbursement of RCDF money influences the way people vote. This follows a familiar logic of reciprocity that has been widely documented in Solomon Islands and other parts of Melanesia (e.g. Morgan 2005). Yet, much as it is accepted as the norm by voters and politicians alike, this reciprocity of receiving gifts from political patrons and voting accordingly operates according to a profound inequality of power (Cox 2009). This is apparent in the petty nature of the RCDF disbursements: roofing iron, solar lights, water tanks and outboard motors were the most commonly reported 'projects'. All of these items are highly valued in North Vella, where there are few opportunities for people to earn cash income, but it is clear that they primarily benefit households. Some older informants lamented that these disbursements have become more individualistic. They recalled an earlier age when MPs funded community assets and did so in ways that were perceived as fairer and more equitable. Nevertheless, these gifts too were modest things like outboard motors. Tozaka had funded a boat and motor for one of the schools, but this seemed to have generated little political capital beyond the principal and teachers at the school. Other payments commonly reported to our team included school fees and, particularly around election time, small disbursements (typically SBD200–1,000) for travel and food. North Vella is a small electorate of 3,840 enrolled voters. It was not lost on some community members that these small-scale benefits do not seem to match up with the generous SBD6 million per annum of RCDF.

Notably absent from the candidates' campaigns was any discussion of the poor state of services in the constituency or the need for improved infrastructure or other 'bigger picture' elements of economic or social development. This is, perhaps, to be expected in a context where, historically, people have little experience of an effective state (Dinnen 2008). The politics of this constituency turned on questions of distribution: should voters stick with their MP of two terms or look to an alternative? Who would make the better distributor of these household scale benefits?

Criticism of Tozaka, heard from both supporters and competitors, centred on these petty disbursements, particularly questions of favouritism and exclusion. Tozaka himself is widely believed to be a good man, highly educated and of honourable intentions (cf. Corbett and Wood 2013). Therefore, criticism of his performance as a distributive politician was deflected to his 'middle men' — the network of village committees set up by the MP to determine who receives benefits and who does not. These committees are managed by two government staff — the constituency development officer and the project officer — but interactions at the local level are likely to be between individuals seeking assistance and members of the MP's committee for each village. During election campaigns, middle men may also act as brokers who influence people's votes on behalf of the MP (cf. Wood 2014).

Many voters reported that middle men only allow RCDF funds to be spent on Tozaka supporters and that they actively exclude those known to support (or suspected of having voted for) political competitors. Some also explained that middle men were 'ripping off' Tozaka, pretending to follow his instructions but actually keeping much of the money for themselves. It was not possible to investigate the veracity of these claims. However, the narrative itself suggests that people who think they are not benefitting from the political system blame local intermediaries, not distant and high-status politicians. Nor do they critique the system itself. For most of our team's informants (and even for members of the research team themselves), petty distributions were thoroughly naturalised as

the core role of politicians, with performance in Parliament a secondary consideration.

Petty disbursement is now deeply embedded in the political culture of Solomon Islands. As the proportion of public funds going to RCDF increases, it seems likely to become further entrenched. This trend is at odds with the country's deteriorating services, particularly in health. As donors consider how best to engage with the realities of politics in Solomon Islands, it is important to understand how the dynamics of clientelism play out at both local and national levels. Donors and civil society activists need to develop a critical appraisal of the implications for national development of a political system where MPs engage with development in highly localised terms and where the electorate's expectations of their MPs and of the role of the state in providing services are narrow, unambitious and usually uncontested. The ways that middle men may insulate political patrons from more direct criticism from their constituents are as yet only dimly understood and require further investigation.

Author Notes

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